

Archbishop of Canterbury – Speech to the House of Lords, 10 May 2023

Illegal Migration Bill

My Lords, we need a Bill to reform migration. We need a Bill to stop the boats. We need a Bill to destroy the evil tribe of traffickers. The tragedy is that without much change this is not that Bill.

This Bill fails utterly to take a long-term and strategic view of the challenges of migration and undermines international cooperation rather than taking an opportunity for the UK to show leadership, as we did in 1951.

There are too many problems for one speech in this Bill and The Rt. Reverend Prelates, The Bishop of Durham and Bishop of Gloucester, will speak to other issues. But I hope the Government will listen to the speeches today pointing out some of the issues, including the eloquent and detailed speech by the noble Lord Coaker.

The existing global conventions and agreements need updating in response to the crises we face today. While now inadequate, what those conventions offer is a baseline from which to build a globally shared understanding of what protection must be given to refugees. They are not inconvenient obstructions get round by any legislative means necessary.

Legal compatibility is a question for the learned lawyers among your Lordships, but it does not require a lawyer to see that what is suggested is a dramatic departure from what was ever envisaged in international law since 1951.

Even if this Bill succeeded in temporarily stopping the boats (and I don't think it will) it won't stop conflict or climate migration. The IPCC forecasts that climate change by itself, let alone the conflicts it's already causing, will lead to at least 800 million more refugees in total by 2050.

And what if other countries follow suit? The UNHCR has warned the Bill could lead to the collapse of the international system that protects refugees. Is that what we want the United Kingdom's contribution to be in our leadership?

Currently, 80% of refugees are still in the global south, protected by the poorest countries in the world. Of course, we cannot take everyone and nor should we, but this Bill has no sense at all of the long-term and of the global nature of the challenge that the world faces. It ignores the reality that

migration must be engaged with at source, as well as in the Channel, as if we, as a country, were unrelated to the rest of the world.

It is a siloed Bill, not a whole-of-Government Bill. It does not draw in conflict management and prevention, which drives migration. It does not draw in climate impacts, which drive migration and conflict. It is isolationist. It is morally unacceptable and politically impractical to let the poorest countries deal with the crisis alone, and cut our international aid.

Nor is there any measure in this Bill for engaging with the criminal gangs of traffickers directly and offensively, rather than trusting simply to what appears to be the unpredictability of market forces, as if traffickers were rationally trained, economic actors and not appalling criminals. There must be safe legal routes put in place as soon as illegal unsafe routes begin to be attacked. We cannot wait for the years that will take place before that happens.

My Lords, this Bill is an attempt at a short-term fix. It risks great damage to the UK's interests and reputation at home and abroad, let alone the interests of those in need of protection, or the nations who together face this challenge. Our interests as a nation are closely linked to our reputation for justice and the rule of law and to our measured language, calm decision, and careful legislation. None of those are seen here.

Long term, globally co-ordinated solutions must be part of the way forward. This nation should lead internationally, not stand apart. I intend to table amendments at Committee stage which encourage this longer-term thinking and collaborative focus, including a plan for combating traffickers and working with international partners to look at updating the 1951 Convention.

Nevertheless, I hope that this house will not support Lord Paddick's, excellent, sympathetic and carefully put amendment. I agree with its sentiment, but I also believe that as Lord Coaker has said, it is our duty to change, not to throw out the Bill.

And finally, as one might expect from these benches, in the New Testament, in Matthew Chapter 25, Jesus calls us to welcome the stranger. That call has been part of the history and culture in this country for centuries and was part of the drive for the Modern Slavery Act. I urge the Government to reconsider much of the Bill which fails to live up to our history, our moral responsibility and our political and international interests.